



**Director of
Central
Intelligence**

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The Ogaden Situation

**Interagency Intelligence Memorandum
Memorandum to Holders**

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NI IIM 81-10006

February 1981

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MEMORANDUM TO HOLDERS OF NI IIM 80-10007

THE OGADEN SITUATION

Information available as of 17 February 1981 was
used in the preparation of this Memorandum.

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KEY JUDGMENTS

Since April 1980, the military situation in the Ogaden has shifted dramatically in Ethiopia's favor. Its forces have reoccupied much of the area and are in their strongest position since the Somali invasion of 1977.

The Ethiopians have military superiority along the border and are capable of mounting air raids on Somalia, subjecting the border area to artillery fire, and conducting shallow raids across the border. The Somali military is severely limited in its capability to respond to Ethiopian attacks or to operate in the Ogaden. Somali regular units have been withdrawn from the Ogaden, although small elements might occasionally cross the border for tactical purposes. The anti-Ethiopian Western Somali Liberation Front insurgents who operate in the Ogaden are in some disarray.

Ethiopian leader Mengistu's recent campaign to improve relations with his neighbors and isolate Somalia further has been relatively successful. Although there have been reports of discontent within the Ethiopian military, we do not believe that trouble for Mengistu is imminent. He seems to be trying to manipulate his ties with the Soviets in order to lessen but not break them, but he will continue to be dependent on Soviet military aid.

In Somalia, President Siad is facing criticism following the Somali military reverses. We have not seen indications of plotting against him but do not discount the possibility that it is occurring. His position may continue to erode in the coming months. He could become the scapegoat for the country's numerous economic, political, and tribal problems, and if the military's expectation of substantial US military assistance is not fulfilled.

Provision of US military aid to Somalia would increase Ethiopian dependence on the Soviets and thus Moscow's leverage. In this circumstance, the Soviets would probably continue to counsel caution regarding large-scale Ethiopian actions against Somalia. If the United States should station combat forces or materiel in Somalia, however, the Soviets would perceive a challenge to their position in the Horn of Africa and would be likely to ease restraints on sizable Ethiopian incursions.

Note: This Memorandum was prepared under the auspices of the National Intelligence Officer for Africa. The Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the Department of State, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Central Intelligence Agency participated in its drafting. It has been coordinated with Intelligence Community representatives at the working level.

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DISCUSSION

Military Developments, April 1980–
February 1981

1. The military situation in the Ogaden has shifted dramatically in favor of the Ethiopians. Their success has been the result of increased troop strength in the region, greater firepower, air superiority, and improvement in ground forces logistics. They now have reoccupied much of the area and are in their strongest position since the Somali invasion of 1977.

2. During the early months of 1980, guerrillas of the Somali-supported Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) and battalion-size units of Somali regular troops were attacking Ethiopian patrols and convoys in the Ogaden in an effort to isolate Ethiopian garrisons and make the war costly for Addis Ababa. These attacks were only partially successful. While the Somalis did tie down large numbers of government troops providing convoy escort and security along their Ogaden transport routes, major garrisons were neither isolated nor overrun.

3. Along with effective counterinsurgent operations in the northern Ogaden, the Ethiopian victory at Uardere in mid-July proved to be the turning point. The Somalis sought to capture Uardere to prevent its use as a centrally located staging base for Ethiopian-backed anti-Siad dissidents of the Somali Salvation Front (SSF), to eliminate an Ethiopian salient that threatened Somali territory, and to slow an Ethiopian buildup. Despite committing as many as 6,000 troops, supported by armor and artillery, the Somalis were forced to pull back after suffering heavy losses in men and equipment. Although most Somali regulars withdrew across the border, a screening force of three to five battalions remained inside the Ogaden, mainly in the southeast, to bolster the WSLF and impede Ethiopian advances toward the frontier.

4. The Ethiopians subsequently went on the offensive and undertook a step-by-step reoccupation of key areas of the Ogaden adjacent to the Somali border. By late October the central Ogaden—the Uardere-K'ebri Dehar-Dagahabur triangle—had been essentially se-

cured, and the Ethiopians moved east from Uardere and southeast from K'ebri Dehar and Kelafo.

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5. By mid-December Ethiopian forces were near the Somali frontier at several points in the central border area and eventually advanced to all of the major border crossing points. Somali regular and guerrilla forces offered little resistance in the face of Ethiopian superiority and the remaining Somali regular Army units withdrew from the Ogaden during this period.

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Comparison of Ethiopian and
Somali Forces, January 1981

	Ethiopia	Somalia
Divisions	8	7
Personnel	100,000	50,000
Tanks	225	150
Armored personnel carriers	250	370
Artillery	175	400
Fighter aircraft	30	35
Guerrillas (estimated)	1,000-1,500 (SSF)	20,000-30,000 (WSLF)
Supporting Cuban Forces		
Armor brigades	2	
Artillery brigade	1	
Personnel	6,000	
Tanks	180	
Armored personnel carriers	60	
Artillery	100	

Note: Somali figures reflect total inventory because of the short distances involved, while Ethiopian and Cuban figures portray only personnel and equipment in southern and eastern Ethiopia. In addition, Somali equipment is generally only about 50-percent operational while that of Ethiopia has a much higher operational rate.

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6. Apart from the central border area, the Ethiopians have kept up the military pressure in other areas of the Ogaden. In the northern Ogaden, Ethiopian troop movements and counterinsurgency operations prompted periodic alarm among the Somalis but no incursions have been launched in this sector since last August. On the southern border, the Ethiopians occupied Iet in early October and held the town for about two weeks. Fighting has continued around Dolo but has consisted primarily of artillery exchanges, and no further significant Ethiopian cross-border raids into Somalia appear to have occurred.

7. In the air, Ethiopian aircraft conducted sporadic raids against Somalia, mostly on military targets, throughout 1980 and January 1981. These attacks caused some military and civilian damage and casualties generally near the border but have not seriously threatened Somali military activity.

Military Capabilities

8. The Ethiopians on their own are capable of mounting air raids on Somalia, harassing the border areas with artillery fire, and conducting temporary shallow raids across the border. They are also capable of occupying several border areas with a brigade or more and of holding the territory indefinitely. Without full Soviet backing for logistic support, however, the Ethiopians are probably not capable of mounting a full-scale multidivision invasion of Somalia.

9. The SSF is capable of continued harassment, especially in the central border area, that includes mining roads and conducting ambushes and raids on civilian targets or small isolated military targets. SSF guerrillas would be unable to hold ground against Somali security forces. While the SSF has claimed responsibility for recent minor bombing incidents in Mogadishu and Berbera, it appears to have little capability for effective terrorism.

10. The Somali Army is severely limited in its ability to operate in the Ogaden and to respond to Ethiopian provocations. With Ethiopian forces at major points along the border, as well as in the interior of the Ogaden, Somali units that might enter the Ogaden to

conduct significant operations risk being cut off and destroyed. The Somali military would have serious difficulty in defending its territory against Ethiopian brigade-size ground incursions and air attacks because of the limited mobility of ground forces, marginal air defense capability, and shortfalls in equipment, supplies, and maintenance.

11. The WSLF probably can continue to harass Ethiopian forces in the Ogaden. The WSLF, however, appears to have been seriously disrupted by the recent Ethiopian advances. We expect Siad to reorganize these forces, and their effectiveness will probably increase gradually, but overall WSLF capabilities will remain below previous levels because of a more difficult supply situation and less direct Somali Army involvement. The degree to which the WSLF improves depends ultimately on the level to which Siad believes he needs a continued insurgency in the Ogaden.

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Diplomatic Context of the Ogaden Dispute

12. For at least the past year, Ethiopian leader Mengistu has placed a high priority on improving his relations with neighboring and pro-Western Sudan, Kenya, and Djibouti as well as with other states with an interest in the Horn of Africa. He is pursuing a variety of objectives in this diplomatic campaign, the most important of which seems to be to seek international cooperation in at least coping with, if not resolving, the half dozen or so active insurgencies—notably in Eritrea and the Ogaden—which have continued to challenge his regime and to drain Ethiopia's economy. Another important objective has been his hope to make Ethiopia eligible for substantial Western economic assistance. Mengistu's campaign has been relatively successful, at least with Ethiopia's three neighbors and in the Organization of African Unity. One effect has been to strengthen the diplomatic isolation of Somalia.

13. A round of reciprocal state visits in late 1980 by Mengistu, Sudanese President Nimeiri, and Kenyan President Moi has led to the emergence of an increasingly significant triangular relationship among these three governments. There are indications that Hassan Gouled of Djibouti may also make the diplomatic rounds soon. At least Nimeiri and Hassan Gouled probably envision these new diplomatic ties as a context for eventually reducing tensions between Somalia and its neighbors, Ethiopia and Kenya. Whether Mengistu and/or Moi has any such perception is ques-

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tionable, but neither has foreclosed the option of diplomatic mediation.

14. In the short run this new diplomatic alignment in the Horn will probably function most importantly as a restraint on Ethiopian military activity within Somalia. As the aggrieved party to the Ogaden dispute, Ethiopia has the moral support of its neighbors and of the OAU generally. This support is significant not only in terms of the Ogaden but also in relation to Eritrea and to prospects for Western economic aid. Any major penetration of generally recognized Somali territory by Ethiopian forces would threaten all of these Ethiopian objectives. Thus Mengistu would probably think long and hard before authorizing a full-scale invasion of Somalia.

15. Another key factor in an Ethiopian decision to invade Somalia would be the attitude of the Soviets. At several times in the past, most recently in July 1980, Moscow apparently has restrained the Ethiopians from crossing Somali borders in force. At least for the short run, we believe that Moscow will continue to be cautious about supporting significant activity by regular Ethiopian forces within Somalia. The Soviets, however, will probably continue to condone SSF operations within Somalia and limited Ethiopian operations within the disputed border zone. We have no reason to believe that Cuba would take a position contrary to that of the Soviets.

16. On the Somali side, Siad over the years has not been very successful in defending Somalia's international position in the dispute with Ethiopia. Apart from the United States, only Italy, Egypt, and China appear to be willing to provide significant military assistance. Siad apparently has succeeded in gaining some economic aid from Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, and, recently, Iraq, but it remains questionable whether these states will finance military purchases under present conditions.

The Internal Somali Scene

17. Siad faces increasing criticism at home following the Somali military reverses in the Ogaden. He is, however, a skillful political tactician, and there is no evidence of organized plotting against him. There is probably no serious short-term internal threat to Siad's rule, but his longer term prospects for survival are uncertain.

18. One consequence of declaring a "state of emergency" and reestablishing the Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC) in October 1980 was to effectively silence the leftists within the regime, most of whom were high officials of the now powerless Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party or members of the Council of Ministers. A few leftists have defected abroad, and several of their prominent leaders have been detained. The leftists do not have significant military support and probably do not represent a serious threat to the regime.

19. The all-military SRC, originally intended as an advisory body under the President, is apparently moving more and more into policymaking. It is becoming a forum in which Siad could be challenged politically. The SRC is collectively responsible for the recent military reverses, however, and any move by it against Siad seems unlikely in the near term, unless there is a future military disaster within Somalia.

20. Some military officers are increasingly frustrated over the lack of visible US support in the face of Ethiopian advances. There is no evidence that this discontent has reached the point of plotting against Siad, but that possibility cannot be dismissed.

22. Many Majertaini would support SSF penetrations of the region, but we believe that Somali forces can cope with that threat, provided Ethiopian regulars remain on their side of the border. Under present circumstances, it does not appear that even extended insurgent operations in the region would directly threaten Siad's rule.

Mengistu's Internal Position and Relations With Moscow

23. There appears to be some basis for recurring reports of dissidence within the Ethiopian military. Rumors about renewed military unrest have circulated in Ethiopia since late summer. The unrest appears to focus largely on professional demands, such as better pay and living conditions, and unhappiness with Soviet

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and Cuban military advisers. But increasingly there are political overtones, [redacted]

[redacted] Although military discontent exists, and military delegations probably have been sent to Addis Ababa to petition Mengistu, we doubt that political trouble for him is imminent.

24. Although Mengistu runs Ethiopia, he is ultimately beholden to the Army to remain in power. The Army, which dominates the government and the embryonic political party, is strongly nationalistic. Some senior officers may sympathize with the dissidents, thus causing Mengistu to deal cautiously with the unrest, rather than summarily as he has in the past.

25. In addition, Mengistu may be using the unrest to strengthen his leverage over the Soviets, by impressing them with the volatility of the Ethiopian political situation and the possibility that they could lose influence. There have been indicators over the past six months of growing Ethiopian dissatisfaction with the levels of Soviet economic assistance and alleged Soviet attempts to interfere in internal politics. Ethiopia's diplomatic campaign to improve relations with its neighbors, its overtures to the United States, and a reported request to India to replace the USSR in training the Ethiopian Air Force reflect Mengistu's interest in reducing his dependence on Moscow. We believe, however, that, despite maneuvering over terms, Mengistu will continue to be tied to the Soviets for military aid and will generally follow the Soviet lead in foreign policy.

Outlook

26. During the next six months to a year, Ethiopia will consolidate its control of the major towns and garrisons within the Ogaden and attempt to extend its control throughout the countryside. This effort, however, will be complicated by long supply lines, harsh climatic conditions, poor morale, and guerrilla activity.

27. In addition to pursuing the military campaign within the Ogaden, he will also continue to apply pressure on Somalia through air attacks, limited cross-border operations by Ethiopian regulars, and increased support to the SSF. The Ethiopians might well attempt to capture and hold some towns such as Iet and Dolo that are along the ill-defined border.

28. For now, Mengistu's immediate goals are to suppress the insurgency in the Ogaden and establish a strong military presence in the region. However, if significant guerrilla activity continues, he is likely to find more direct action against Somalia necessary. This could involve more extensive penetrations of the border areas, a full-scale invasion, or an attempt to oust Siad. The Ethiopians probably see the SSF as a primary vehicle to weaken and perhaps bring about the overthrow of the Siad government in the hope that Somali irredentism will pass with Siad. In any event, the Ethiopians will continue to use the SSF to promote tribal strife in the country and to apply military pressure both along the border and inside Somalia, pending its possible later use in a larger role. Mengistu may also believe that, if Siad left the scene, his departure could undermine the US-Somali relationship, which the Ethiopians view as posing a threat to them.

29. Given the longstanding distrust and even hatred between the present Ethiopian and Somali leaderships, a legal or permanent settlement of the Ogaden dispute appears highly unlikely over the next 12 months. Nevertheless, some kind of modus vivendi that seeks a reduction in tensions cannot be excluded. A number of third parties—Sudan, Djibouti, South Yemen, and perhaps Nigeria (as head of the OAU committee on the dispute)—have been attempting unsuccessfully to mediate. The OAU negotiated a formal agreement demilitarizing the border region following the fighting that took place in the Ogaden in 1964, and there have been other periods of tacit cease-fire.

30. In Somalia, Siad will be under pressure to continue the fighting, at a minimum by supporting guerrilla activity. To deflect domestic criticism and attempt to maintain internal unity, Siad will—as he has in the past—rely on the Ethiopian threat and the Ogadeni cause. His most realistic option for pursuing this policy at the moment lies in attempting to build up Somali military capabilities and revitalizing the guerrillas. Ethiopian strength along the frontier precludes use of the regular Army in the Ogaden, at least at the level of last year. Discreet support to the guerrillas would enable Siad to avoid US concern about the presence of Somali regulars in the Ogaden, thus removing an obstacle to the development and perhaps expansion of US-Somali relations.

31. Siad's inability to deal with the Ethiopian military threat as well as his domestic problems will fur-

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ther erode his position in the months ahead. While he is a skilled manipulator, his options in dealing with these problems are becoming more limited. He has gambled that the access agreement and association with the United States will provide him with the political, military, and economic support that he believes would help rebuild the country's economic and military structure and thus bolster his position.

32. Despite his past adeptness in balancing competing tribal and political interests within the country, Siad could at some point become the scapegoat for Somalia's problems. Grumbling over the economic situation has not yet reached troublesome proportions, but Siad's attempts to line up Western assistance may require economic reforms that will undermine his tribal supporters, who benefit personally from the present system. He will also have to be especially careful to avoid giving the military reasons to feel the armed forces are bearing the brunt of any austerity program.

33. If Siad is unable to attract significant outside military and economic support, there would be a strong possibility of a challenge to his position from dissatisfied military officers. They might decide his removal was necessary not only to win external support but also to make the reforms needed to reverse the country's economic decline. In such a situation Siad would probably calculate that Washington's desire for Somali military facilities gave the United States a stake in his survival, and he might—as he did before with the Soviets—threaten to deny access to these facilities in an effort to acquire additional US assistance.

34. The Soviet Union's immediate goals in the Horn of Africa include solidifying its position in Ethiopia, discouraging the United States from exercising military access rights in Somalia, and undermining the US foothold in Somalia if Washington should establish a

military presence there. Soviet policy regarding Ethiopian actions against Somalia will be influenced by US moves in the area.

35. Provision of US military assistance to Somalia would heighten Ethiopian perceptions of a threat and increase Addis Ababa's dependence on Moscow. The Soviets would be likely to play on Ethiopian fears of a US-backed Somali resurgence in an attempt to further solidify their position and expand their access to Ethiopian air and naval facilities. Moscow would also seek to blame the United States for inflaming hostilities in the Horn. But in these circumstances the Soviets would probably continue to counsel Ethiopian restraint regarding an invasion of Somalia, even though they are aware that they cannot exercise full control over their client. They probably believe that large-scale Ethiopian incursions would bolster US determination to establish a larger military presence in the region. It is possible, however, that Moscow would approve, if not urge, a more aggressive policy against Somalia to discourage a US military buildup there.

36. If the United States fully implemented its military access agreement with Somalia, Moscow would probably support greater Ethiopian efforts to destabilize the Siad regime, including deeper Ethiopian incursions into Somalia. In the event that the United States expanded this relationship with Somalia and established a major US combat presence there, the Soviets would probably encourage stepped-up destabilizing efforts, and they might be more open to an Ethiopian argument for a full-fledged invasion of Somalia. But the Soviets would be cautious about an invasion because of the risk of a US-Soviet confrontation in the region. Moreover, while they might provide logistic support and help plan a campaign, they would stop short of engaging their own or Cuban forces in Somalia.

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